

Research for Development

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Universities as Drivers of Social Innovation

Theoretical Overview and Lessons
from the "campUS" Research

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Politecnico
di Milano 

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Theoretical Overview and Lessons from the "campUS" Research

This book reviews the social role of universities in their local urban contexts and describes a number of initiatives of major interest in terms of the impact achieved, the range of stakeholders involved, and the significance of the university campus and teachers as agents of change. It is divided into three parts, the first of which draws on the international literature to provide theoretical background regarding the role of universities and university campuses as drivers of and magnets for social innovation. The second and third parts each focus on four main themes of interest in the contemporary design setting: urban community gardens, social TV stations, mobile pavilions, and economic sustainability models. After a theoretical overview that also illustrates international best practices, it then focuses on the specific context of Milan, based on the pilot project recently conducted by the *Politecnico di Milano*, "CampUS - incubation and implementation of social practices", which won the 25th ADI Compasso d'Oro Award (2018) in the social design category. The book is of interest to academics, students, those working at public institutions, and city policymakers.

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from the “campUS” Research

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Introduction

This book is based on a research project called *campUS—Incubation and settings for social practices* which was funded under the 2014 Polisocial Award, the Politecnico di Milano's social responsibility programme. It extends its framework of reference by supplementing it with the best practices that lay behind the actions undertaken, that is, by placing it within a broader international framework of reference which can guide the progress of scientific research, particularly in the field of social innovation.

Specifically, the publication posits and analyses the fundamental role that universities can play in guiding, fostering and testing scientific research in the context within which they operate. Indeed, there are already several examples of virtuous relationships between the spaces and skills that are present on university campuses and the local (physical and social) context in which they are situated. These projects create highly recognizable spaces which confer a strong sense of identity on them and which mobilize local communities through solutions that foster social cohesion and innovation. The publication tackles this paradigm from a variety of perspectives, in complementary subject areas, which involve profound differences in terms of methodology, potential impact, local legacy and the kinds of relationships that can be established with local stakeholders. Specifically, it analyses three areas of design that are implemented on different scales and over different standard time horizons, which have shown themselves to be central themes in the contemporary debate relating to research into social innovation, into co-design and into processes of “open-source” urban regeneration.

The three areas analysed, all of them ascribable to the principles of social innovation, regard:

1. the increasingly widespread and widely recognized practices of urban agriculture;
2. experiments relating to neighbourhood TV as a participatory model mixing co-design and participatory video practices, based on the assumptions that

storytelling techniques and audio-visual language, foster self-expression and represent drivers for social inclusion;

3. innovative proposals for an “open-source” city, which is built by means of “travelling” or “pop-up” projects that can stand as drivers of urban regeneration;

Furthermore, the long-term economic sustainability of social innovation projects has been studied, and the results have been applied to the above-listed actions. The economic sustainability models have been developed with a focus on joint participation on the part of local stakeholders and accountability in the management of a public legacy.

These four research areas are investigated by three different research department at the Politecnico di Milano in the areas of Design, Architecture and Urban Studies, Management Engineering. The research aims to confirm the university as a stakeholder capable of addressing the various local communities, of mediating between public and private as well as collective and individual interests, of setting experimental processes in motion in each of the four fields mentioned above, dealing with administrative, social, technical and management issues while at the same time developing new participatory models in order to achieve the greatest possible degree of inclusion and engagement.

The publication is structured in three parts. The first provides some theoretical background with reference to international literature. It goes on to set out a further two parts in parallel, both of which analyse the abovementioned four themes, which are deemed to be of particular interest for the contemporary design scene. One of these parts consists of an overview framework illustrating international best practices for each area, while the other focuses on the specific case of *campUS*, reporting and testing these observations in the specific context of Milan. More specifically:

- The first part provides an overview of the role of universities in their local contexts, specifically highlighting a number of cases of major interest in terms of impact achieved, results obtained, range of stakeholders involved or experimental nature of the initiatives undertaken. This part places value on the strategic, visionary and concrete role played by universities as drivers of and magnets for social innovation. This first part of the book sets out to analyse, in particular, a number of pilot projects which make the university campus and teachers themselves agents of change. Four chapters are included on *Social practices in the commons* (Davide Fassi), *Campuses and the city* (Davide Fassi), *A designer's role in inclusive design processes* (Pierluigi Salvadeo) and *The role of the university campus in local economic development* (Elena Perondi).
- The second part explains a number of important research areas seen from both a domestic and an international perspective, which are prerequisites for those social innovation actions which move within the areas of co-design and open-source design. This theoretical overview focuses on the value of best practices and refers to the current scientific debate. Seven chapters explore four main areas of interest: design for urban agriculture, media co-design, the

contemporary urban context and economic sustainability. These topics are told in *Growing food in universities* and *Design tools for urban agriculture* (Davide Fassi), *Local communities have stories to tell: storytelling for social inclusion* (Elisa Bertolotti), *Co-designing media at the local level: the Social TV framework* (Francesca Piredda), *The continuous present of the contemporary city, ideas and practices* (Pierluigi Salvadeo), *Sustainability models for social innovation projects: a theoretical perspective* (Paolo Landoni, Daniel Trabucchi) and *Sustainability models for social innovation projects: an empirical perspective* (Paolo Landoni, Daniel Trabucchi).

- The third part takes up each specific project area (urban community gardens, social TV, mobile pavilions and economic sustainability models), tying the observations in with the context of Milan, starting from the “campUS” pilot project conducted by the Politecnico di Milano.
- The final conclusions draw points for discussion from all of the experiences previously analysed to highlight the specific aspects, potential and critical issues relating to the models proposed, which are critically compared. Chapters included in this part start from the four main topics explored in the previous part to detail the eight chapters about *Co-designing urban agriculture with local communities* and *Designing the guidelines for shared urban community gardens* (Laura Galluzzo), *Practicing languages: designing tools and techniques for self-representation and self-reflection* (Elisa Bertolotti), *Series4Good: co-designing a serial format for building a long-term, continuous and generative collaboration* (Francesca Piredda), *Socializing: enabling interactions through social media and digital fiction* (Simona Venditti), *The background of the P.A.A. I.: a research between spatial marginality and social activation* and *Co-designing the P.A.A.I.: a pilot project for Adaptable, Self-Managed and Mobile Pavilions* (Barbara Di Prete), *Co-design of sustainability models: the process* and *Co-design of sustainability models: examples* (Elena Pellizzoni, Daniel Trabucchi, Paolo Landoni). The book ends with some reflections about the work done and with future perspectives on the explored topics.

The *campUS* Project

campUS—incubation and implementation of social practices is a research programme funded by the 2014 Polisocial Award¹ as a potential incubator for social, locally scalable practices.

Specifically, the research-action project targeted NEETs (young people Not in Education, Employment or Training) and the over-sixty-fives, providing NEETs with the opportunity to acquire skills and become involved in actions designed to promote intergenerational dialogue with a view to giving back to the over-sixty-fives a significant social role by placing value on their historical memory.

¹ The social responsibility programme @Politecnico di Milano, www.polisocial.polimi.it.

The research was organized around two areas of action, conducted in parallel: *campUS on*, for on-campus actions, and *campUS off*, for off-campus actions (that is, in the local neighbourhood and beyond).

The objective was twofold: to create spaces on university campuses as incubators for social practices in which actions to foster social relations (such as services, spaces and communication systems) can be developed, trialled and prototyped with a method based on co-design and participatory design (*campUS on*) and to develop a “landscape” of permanent actions with the potential to result in social enterprises, through a process of virtuous exchange with the aforementioned prototyping actions (*campUS off*).

The *campUS* project was thus structured along two lines: a theoretical, metadesign dimension and an applied design dimension for trialling dynamics of concrete involvement/engagement, testing tools and prototyping models of innovative social practices.

The Politecnico di Milano’s Bovisa Campus and Milan’s Zone 9 district constituted the actual case study where actions to concretely involve citizens and other social actors have been tested, making it possible to explore original methods for creating relations between stakeholders.

A large number of the Politecnico’s areas of expertise were involved in supporting the actions that formed part of the project: the Department of Design in designing communication projects, spaces and services, with a strong focus on social innovation issues; DASiU (the Department of Architecture and Urban Studies) in designing citywide urban installations and new social spaces and DIG (Department of Management, Economics and Industrial Engineering) in developing sustainable economic models. More than 50 associations and 2000 citizens have been involved in 2-year activities².

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² Organizations involved: Zone 9 District Council, Municipality of Milan; Dergano/Bovisa Library; Istituto Comprensivo Maffucci; ABG—Associazione Bodio Guicciardi; Il Giardino degli Aromi; SIT—Social Innovation Teams; Fondazione Aquilone; Associazione 9 x 9—Idee in Rete; Olinda; “Maffucci” Middle School; “Rodari” Middle School; CELIM; and Municipal Nursery School, Via Catone. In addition to these organizations, which were officially included in the project’s general programme, over 40 cultural and social associations operating in the Zone 9 district were involved in the implementation phase.

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